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The 1918 Reform Act, Redistribution and Scottish Politics

Ewen A. Cameron

University of Edinburgh

Abstract

This paper examines the effect of the 1918 Representation of the People Act on Scottish politics. It notes the extensive addition to the electorate with the enfranchisement of adult males and most women over the age of thirty years. The main focus of the article is on the effect of the provisions of the Act in terms of redistribution of seats in Scotland. Although the overall level of Scottish representation stayed the same, at seventy seats, there was a profound shift from the rural areas of the north and south of Scotland to the industrial areas of west central Scotland and the city of Glasgow, which was awarded a further eight seats. In addition, the majority of the 'Districts of Burghs', a legacy of the Union of 1707, were abolished. It is argued that these changes created new political conditions in Scotland that favoured the Labour party over the inter-war period, and especially in the 1920s. The arguments – economic, historical and political – deployed in defence of seats scheduled for abolition by the Boundary Commission are analysed.

Keywords

Electoral reform; franchise; redistribution; Scotland; Highlands; Borders; Glasgow; districts of burghs; Labour party; Liberal party.

Although the features of the Scottish political landscape of the inter-war period are fairly clear in the conventional interpretation – Liberal demise, Labour breakthrough, Unionist consolidation – the nature of the process which lay behind the demolition of the former pattern of Liberal dominance was complex.¹ The expansion of the Scottish electorate from 760,000 in 1910 to 2.2 million in 1918 gave politics a greater claim to the description ‘democratic’ and laid the foundations of many aspects of our modern political system.² The increase was greatest in urban industrial areas, where the expansion was of the order of 250 per cent. The achievement of full adult male enfranchisement in the Representation of the People Act 1918 may have had a disproportionate effect on Scotland since the level of enfranchisement prior to 1918 had been lower.³ The impact of full adult male enfranchisement was less evident in the 1918 election than in later contests due to the low turnout. The enfranchisement of most women (around 80 per cent) over the age of thirty added a new factor to elections. The retention of property qualifications for this class of voters, their definition in relation to their husbands and discrimination against unmarried women were regressive features and probably favoured the established parties rather than Labour. These problems were dealt with in 1928 when full adult female enfranchisement was granted.⁴

As well as the extension of the franchise in 1918 and 1928, there was significant redistribution. This was a crucial element of the new system as the determination of the number of voters in each constituency in establishing the equal value of votes.⁵ In geographical terms, the beneficiary was Glasgow – which acquired a further eight seats – and the central lowlands. These changes disadvantaged the Liberal party, as almost all of the thirteen seats which were abolished had a Liberal history, and

favoured Labour.⁶ This article will develop this theme and look in detail at the way in which the redistribution elements of the 1918 Reform Act changed the political landscape of Scotland. In a number of places there was a feeling that the government had introduced these changes without sufficient consultation and that the midst of the war was not the most appropriate time to bring in such a major reform of the electoral system.⁷ Attention will be given to the arguments that were used in the debates around these changes and, in particular, there will be a focus on the reduction of the number of the Districts of Burghs constituencies, especially in the Highland and Borders regions of Scotland.

If we divide the country into five electoral regions and compare the pattern in 1918 with that in 1885, we can see the shift which took place.

Regional distribution of Scottish constituencies, 1885 and 1918.

	Number of seats		Percentage of seats	
	1885	1918	1885	1918
North East	10	9	14.2	12.6
Highlands	9	6	12.9	8.4
Western	23	32	32.8	45.0
Eastern	19	20	27.1	28.2
Southern	9	4	12.9	5.6

The table shows a shift in representation from the rural to the urban, from the west to the east, and from both southern and northern Scotland to the central industrial belt.

Gordon Brown has argued that this meant that the 'electoral geography of Scotland ... was for the first time dominated by working-class constituencies'.⁸ This also brought representation into line with population to a greater extent than ever before. The redistribution of 1918 was conducted according to entirely different principles from that of 1885.⁹ There was a much clearer assumption of popular representation now that there was full male enfranchisement and most women over the age of thirty were able to vote.

The Boundary Commissioners, who had the task of drawing the new electoral map of the UK, were enjoined to create seats with at least 50,000 people but also to pay attention to recognised administrative boundaries.¹⁰ The Districts of Burghs were profoundly reorganised and reduced in number from thirteen to six, as shall be discussed below.

The first instruction contained a threat to the representation of rural Scotland but the latter provided some comfort. There might well have been a temptation among Unionists, who dominated the coalition government, to apply the rules in a rigorous manner given the recent electoral history of areas such as the highlands.

Interestingly, Sir George Younger, the Chairman of the Conservative Party and former Scottish Whip, made a plea for a relaxed application of the population formula in the highlands. He tried to give the impression that this was contrary to his own party interest, in that the highlands had a radical history. Lying behind this apparent generosity of spirit, however, lay political calculations. Younger may have been worried that reducing highland representation in favour of the industrial lowlands could benefit the Labour Party. Further, he used older ideas of representation to

make his argument. He argued that 'we ought to deal with areas with their characteristics and we ought to deal with historical and separate interests and so on'.¹¹ This was a conservative argument against popular representation. There were also voices arguing against the application of the arithmetical principle of representation.¹² Arguments in favour of a new constituency for the Western Isles, for example, were expressed in terms of its remoteness from the political centre in London and the special economic and social problems of the islands.¹³ Although the electorate in the new seat created there in 1918 was small – with only 18,000 voters (out of a total population of around 60,000 according to the 1911 Census) – it had greater geographical coherence and improved the quality of representation of the islands, which had formerly been divided between Inverness-shire (Harris, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist, Barra) and Ross and Cromarty (Lewis). The Boundary Commissioners justified this recommendation with reference to 'the character of the constituency and the pursuits of the islanders'.¹⁴

This redistribution was at least as important as the extension of the franchise. The pattern of representation in Scotland was altered profoundly. The pre-war system had left urban industrial Scotland, where most of the population resided, considerably under-represented, and the rural fringes of the country over-represented. This was a pattern which went back to 1832, and even to 1707, and the anomalies had not been fully dealt with in the nineteenth century, even by the major redistribution which took place in 1885.¹⁵ The redistribution of 1918 went a considerable way to resolving these issues. because it changed the electoral map of Scotland in a way which clearly benefitted the Labour party by increasing the number of seats in the geographical area of their greatest strength and diminishing the

number of seats in the rural fringes of Scotland where they had little support. The results of this change were more clearly seen clearly at the 1922 election. In that contest Labour, won 19 of its 29 seats in western Scotland. Nearly half (48.1 per cent according to the 1921 Census) of the electorate was located there and Labour's share of the vote was 44.1 per cent in this region. The new electoral geography seemed to favour the Labour Party, at least in the 1922 election.

In the 32 seats of the industrial region of West Central Scotland the Labour party developed for the first time an electoral heartland in Scotland. This was not immediately evident in 1918 as the party won only six seats (Aberdeen North, Edinburgh Central, Glasgow Govan, South Ayrshire, West Fife, Hamilton). The factors that produced this result were all temporary. They included the defective register, the disenfranchisement of many serving soldiers, the resulting low turn out; and the jingoistic appeal of the Coalition government.¹⁶ In comparison to other industrial cities in Britain it has been argued that 'Glasgow undoubtedly did swing further to Labour in these years than other British cities, and retained its high degree of Labour loyalty through the inter-war years'. In 1922, an election more representative of the general trends of the period, Labour won nearly 42 per cent of the vote; only Sheffield with 42.5 per cent topped that and many English industrial cities returned a much lower Labour vote. In Manchester, for example, it was 35 per cent, Leeds 26.5 per cent and Liverpool 25 per cent.¹⁷ In 1918 the Unionists won ten seats in Glasgow as part of the Coalition. Left to their own devices in 1922 (and it is worth remembering that Scottish MPs were keen to sustain the Coalition) they won only four.¹⁸ They did a little better in 1924, adding Partick and Maryhill to the prosperous seats in the south and west of the city in which they tended to do well,

but prior to the onset of renewed coalition politics in 1931, they remained a minority among Glasgow MPs. In the four elections of the 1920s, after the demise of the Coalition and prior to the split of 1931 and the disaffiliation of the ILP in 1932, they won 38 out of the sixty contests in Glasgow, the Unionists won 21 and the Liberals only a single seat – Partick in 1922. This last point is a telling one. There was a strong Liberal tradition in Glasgow, in 1885 the party had taken all seven of the city's seats and performed strongly in 1906 and in both 1910 elections, although Liberal Unionism was a significant force in the West of Scotland.¹⁹ By the election of 1922 the party was pushed to the geographical peripheries of Scotland in the Highlands and other rural areas.²⁰ In the industrial west outside Glasgow, where there were 17 seats after 1918 the picture was more mixed. There were some seats, such as Hamilton, South Ayrshire, Bothwell, Coatbridge and the surviving Dumbarton District of Burghs, where Labour dominated; another group of seats (North Lanarkshire, Rutherglen and West Renfresshire) where they did very well and overall Labour won 39 out of the 68 contests in the 1920s. There were other seats where the picture was more varied: North Ayrshire and the Ayr District of Burghs were solid Unionist seats; Greenock and Paisley retained Liberal members in the 1920s and Motherwell, returning Tory and Communist, as well as Labour, MPs in the inter-war period was in a category of its own.²¹

Another key element of the context in which the 1918 election was fought was the fact that the franchise was radically altered compared to December 1910. In the pre-war period, only around 60 per cent of adult males – and substantially fewer in the poorer urban areas – were able to vote.²² After the extension of the franchise in 1918 all adult males were able to vote, as were most women over the age of thirty.

Although the overall level of enfranchisement of women was roughly the same in Scotland (79.2 per cent) as in England (79.5 per cent), women were enfranchised on a slightly different basis. In Scotland it was a householder franchise or a tenancy of non-domestic property of at least £5 annual rental value. The system worked against domestic servants who lived with their employers. There were interesting variations in the extent to which the electorate in particular seats was female and the proportion of females who were enfranchised across the Scottish constituencies. Some seats, such as towns dominated by the textile industries, had higher levels of females in the population but relatively low levels of female enfranchisement because the system disenfranchised single, unmarried working women (who were less frequently occupiers of a dwelling house) constituted a relatively large proportion of the electorate in such towns. There was a direct contrast with towns based on engineering, metal working or coal mining, where there were relatively few economic opportunities for women. The consequence in these cases was that single females over the age of thirty and in employment were fewer than in textile towns and a higher proportion of the women over the age of 30 were married and more likely to qualify as voters.²³

Another key issue in considering the 1918 Reform Act in the Scottish context is the extent to which grievances about the extent as well as the geography of Scottish representation emerged in the debate. This stemmed from the way in which the Boundary Commissioners charged with the duty of redrawing the boundaries were operating. The number of Irish seats was to remain unaltered and the overall number of seats in Britain was originally intended to remain largely the same. Beyond this, however, there was no reference to Scotland. The Commissioners were working on

the assumption that 50,000 was the minimum population level for a Parliamentary seat. Strict application of this rule would have created some seats of very large area in rural parts of Scotland, not only in the Highlands but also in the Borders.²⁴ An English MP, James Mason (who sat for Windsor) succeeded with an amendment to the instructions to the Boundary Commissioners to give them flexibility in order that redistribution did not create constituencies of 'inconvenient size and character'. After the redistribution was complete, Scotland had seven of its 71 constituencies below the 50,000 threshold, compared to 10 out of 485 in England.²⁵ This gave the nature of Scottish politics in the post-1918 period a quite distinctive character, but the alternative would have been some huge seats that would have been virtually impossible to represent. The peripheries of Scotland, where most of these seats were located in the period after 1918, tended to have a different electoral history from the central belt. Over the course of the twentieth century, most Liberal or Scottish National Party representation was outside of the central belt. This could be seen as late as October 1974, when the two main parties received quite a low combined vote and the SNP gained 31.4 per cent of the vote. Most of the eleven seats that they gained were outside the central belt, but they racked up large numbers of votes in central Scotland without gaining any seats. The history of Scottish Liberal representation has also been largely confined to these smaller seats. This, however, masks the fact that this 'periphery' was much smaller than it had been prior to 1918 and this, also, had a profound effect on Scottish electoral history, as shall be discussed below.

One scholar has detected the articulation of 'nationalistic arguments' by Liberal and Labour MPs who argued for sustained or increased numbers of Scottish MPs when

the case could not be made on 'democratic' grounds.²⁶ Reviewing the technical debates around the appointment of the Boundary Commissioners, a range of broad issues emerge. Principal among them was one of the longest running debates in modern Scottish politics, the extent of Scotland's representation in the House of Commons and the role of the Scottish MPs. Eugene Wason, the MP for Clackmannan and Kinross, argued that there were dangers that if Scottish seats were reduced there could be a growing perception that the Union was not working to Scotland's best advantage:

We are a separate nationality, we have our own system of laws, our own education system, and our own marriage laws. In Scotland the sexes are equal, and, as a matter of fact, we are constantly getting rebuked by our constituents that we do not act like the Irish party, and then they say we might be able to do something for Scotland. I am not one of those who want to see an independent Scottish party in this House in the same sense as there is an independent Irish party, nor do I begrudge Ireland its separate representation. But in Scotland we feel we are, and have been, somewhat severely neglected.²⁷

Wason was a supporter of Home Rule for Scotland and some of the MPs who supported him in his amendment to ensure that there was not reduction in the number of Scottish MPs were members of the Young Scots Society. One of these, James Mylne Hogge, probably spoiled the case made by his colleague by arguing in an aggressive way that Scotland was always badly treated by the House of Commons and that the issue of Scottish representation could not be dealt with until

Scotland received its own parliament. He assumed that if a Scottish Parliament was established, then that would end Scottish representation at Westminster. When Sir George Younger exclaimed 'Heaven forbid', Hogge replied:

what we want is a Parliament in Scotland for our own affairs. If you give us that, we do not care a straw how many members come to Westminster. You can get rid of us altogether if you give us a Parliament of our own to deal with Scottish affairs.²⁸

This is an issue that has echoed through every debate that has touched on the idea of Scottish home rule. It is mostly known today as the West Lothian question, after the constituency of the late Tam Dalyell, who articulated it incessantly in the debates over devolution in the 1974–9 period. Even in 1918, however, the question was not new, and it had figured in debates over Gladstonian Home Rule schemes in the 1880s and 1890s. As a devolutionist, Hogge was unusual in answering the question so unequivocally and in assuming that Scottish MPs would withdraw from Westminster in the eventuality of a Parliament being established in Edinburgh. He deprecated the 'arithmetical' approach to the settlement of the representation question and argued that if some Scottish seats were to be sacrificed in the redistribution, then the University seats were prime candidates for abolition. He called them 'undemocratic' and argued that the members who were elected for these seats were unrepresentative of Scotland.²⁹ Arguments were put forward to defend the relative over-representation of Scotland in the House of Commons at this time: the distance from the centre of power in London, the sparsely-populated nature of some of the constituencies, and the dangers inherent in reducing the representation

of the rural and agricultural areas in favour of the urban industrial areas. These points will be pursued in more depth later in this article through consideration of the redistribution in the Highland and the Borders regions of Scotland.

It is interesting that the major reform that took place in 1918 has not attracted the same attention as the acts of 1832, 1868 and 1884-85.³⁰ In many ways the electoral landscape was changed more profoundly in 1918 than on these earlier occasions. Scotland's system of representation went back to the Union of 1707 and although the extent of Scottish representation in the House of Commons was extended from 45 members then to the 70 seats that existed in December 1910 at the last election before the Great War, there were many continuities. Except for the addition of university seats in 1868, the essential structure of representation remained the same: the historic Scottish counties were represented, although some of them were divided in 1868 and 1885; the Scottish burghs were represented, sometimes in groups or 'Districts'; although the larger ones – Glasgow and Edinburgh, for example – were divided into constituencies of roughly equal size.³¹ There were strong links here with the historic local administrative entities of Scotland. Some of these 'Districts' were quite coherent and composed of small Burghs that were reasonably close together. The Leith District included Leith, Portobello and Musselburgh, all on the coast near Edinburgh. Others, however, were very different. The Ayr District, for example, included Ayr and Irvine, both in Ayrshire, and Campeltown, Inveraray and Oban, situated across the large Highland county of Argyll. Even taking into account the extent to which an MP was expected to be present in his constituency in this period this seat would have presented a challenge. In 1918 the sitting MP was Sir George Younger, and during the debates on the bill he described this seat as being

'divided by the Atlantic' and talked of the competing, even antagonistic, interests of the different burghs, especially around the fishing industry.³² The Wick District of Burghs, represented by the Secretary for Scotland, Robert Munro, stretched from Cromarty on the 'Black Isle', just north of Inverness, through Dingwall and Tain in the eastern part of Ross-shire, to Wick in the northerly county of Caithness and then to Kirkwall, the main town in Orkney. Other seats were composed of more closely-situated burghs, but were simply awkward in other ways. This was true, for example, of the Stirling District, which was composed of the two major, but very different, towns of Stirling and Dunfermline, together with the smaller burghs of Culross, Inverkeithing and South Queensferry which were spread across the north and south banks of the Forth. The politics of this seat, represented from 1868 to 1908 by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal Party leader from 1898 to 1908, presented difficulties in that the Liberals in Dunfermline, which had a radical tradition, behaved very differently from their counterparts in Stirling. This was resolved in 1918 when Stirling and Dunfermline were each made the centre of new Districts of Burghs.

The Boundary Commissioners working assumptions posed a very severe threat to the Scottish Districts of Burghs, although some press comment argued that their disappearance would 'occasion no regret' this was an issue of some significance.³³ The Commissioners conceded that any burgh with a population of more than 70,000 should survive and that a two-member burgh (a single constituency electing two MPs, such as Dundee) should not be divided or lose members if it had a population of more than 120,000. They aimed to reorganise the Burgh Districts so that all the Burghs in a District were in the same county. Where Districts were abolished, the Burghs were included in their surrounding county; for example, Dingwall was

absorbed into Ross-shire. The outcome was the reduction of the number of the Districts constituencies from 13 to six, and the creation of more logical and geographically-coherent groupings.

DISTRICT	Constituent Burghs
AYR	Ayr, Ardrossan, Irvine. Prestwick, Saltcoats, Troon
DUMBARTON	Dumbarton, Clydebank
DUNFERMLINE	Dunfermline, Cowdenbeath, Inverkeithing, Lochgelly
KIRKCALDY	Kirkcaldy, Buckhaven, Methil, Burntisland, Dysart, Kinghorn
MONTROSE	Montrose, Arbroath, Brechin, Forfar, Inverbervie
STIRLING	Stirling, Falkirk, Grangemouth

There was a strong electoral implication in this change. In the thirteen pre-1918 Districts, there had been a strong tradition of Liberal voting; in December 1910, only the Ayr District was held by the Conservatives and the St Andrews District by the Liberal Unionists (and the latter had been Liberal as recently as January 1910). The absorption by East Fife of the St Andrews District was a significant factor in Asquith's defeat in 1918, although the county seat was won by Liberals or National Liberals at each inter-war election with the exception of a Unionist victory in 1924.³⁴ All of the others were represented by Liberals, although Leith Burghs was gained by a Conservative in a by-election in 1914. However, of the six surviving Districts, in 1918 Ayr was held by the Conservatives, another four seats were held by Lloyd George Liberals and only one seat, Stirling, was won by an Independent Liberal. Looking at the inter-war period as a whole, only in the Montrose District was there any tradition

of Liberal representation in the inter-war period, with victories for that party in 1923, 1924 and 1929. Overall, the six post-1918 Burgh Districts were another repository of support for the Labour Party over the inter-war period. Aside from the Ayr and Montrose Districts, which never returned a Labour MP between the wars, Labour found these new seats relatively happy hunting grounds. Dumbarton (David Kirkwood) and Dunfermline were held by Labour MPs at each election from 1922 to 1935. In the cases of Kirkcaldy, and Stirling and Falkirk, there were four elections at which Labour MPs were returned, one of the exceptions being the special case of 1931.³⁵ In some ways, the abolition of the pre-1918 Districts was the most controversial result of the redistribution in the 1918 Reform Act, and it deserves to be discussed in more depth.

The general tone of historical discussion about the 1918 Reform Act has been dominated by its apparent democratisation of the UK's electoral system and, where caveats have been noted, they are largely centred on the failure to abolish plural voting, introduce proportional representation or a fully gender-equal franchise.³⁶ These points are valid if the act is to be tested against the measure of a fully democratic system, and they were voiced at the time. One northern newspaper with a radical Liberal tradition noted at an early point in the process that, although the scheme was a 'step forward', the reforms meant that 'we are still a long way from giving every adult British citizen a vote without reference to residence or property qualification'.³⁷ There were other worries hidden in the debate over the bill in its Scottish context and many of them can be explored through discussion of the abolition of the Districts of Burghs. The defenders of these seats were, of course, trying to protect their own interests, but the arguments that they used tell us much

about Scottish political culture in the early-twentieth century and at a time of great change. The first argument that was used was that these were very old seats and represented a continuity to pre-Union Scotland and, therefore, to something genuinely 'Scottish'. This was not a period in which there was a particular romanticisation of Scotland's political system before 1707; indeed, academic historiography tended to be rather dismissive of the Scottish Parliament and other institutions, regarding them as corrupt, unsophisticated and dominated by the aristocracy.³⁸ Outside this body of literature there may have been a greater affection for an older Scotland. The Town Clerk of Kirkcaldy in Fife, resisting the addition of Methil and Buckhaven (which contained large numbers of working-class voters, especially coal miners), argued that the extant Kirkcaldy District had survived unchanged since 1707.³⁹ A similar point was made in the south of Scotland, where the Dumfries and Border Burghs were facing oblivion, and one local newspaper noted that the representation of the smaller towns of Scotland had been a central feature of the pre-Union system in that one of the 'estates' of the unicameral Scottish parliament were the Burgh and Shire Commissioners.⁴⁰

If one argument used against the break-up of burgh districts was based on history, another was predicated on economics. The Boundary Commissioners were enjoined to keep industrial and agricultural areas separate in their work on county constituencies, but the diversity of economic interests in the burghs made this more difficult to use as a basis for reorganisation. Nevertheless, it was resorted to by those who defended threatened districts. In Fife, for example, in the Kirkcaldy burghs there was an argument about the extent to which the mining areas of Buckhaven and Methil, which had 'special and peculiar problems', according to Kirkcaldy Town

Council, would change the nature of the seat. In a similar argument the Town Clerk of Dunfermline objected to his burgh being grouped with Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly, both dominated by coal mining, and thought that the textile and service town of Dunfermline would be better grouped with the neighbouring and growing town of Rosyth.⁴¹ In the event the new seat was constituted as Dunfermline, Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly. There was an interesting three-sided contest there in 1918, which was won by a Coalition Liberal candidate, but in 1922 a two-sided contest saw a victory for the Labour candidate and he held the seat until 1945.⁴² In the north east of Scotland an argument was made by the 'leading citizens of Fraserburgh' that there should be a new District created composed of fishing ports from Peterhead to Buckie around the Aberdeenshire and Banffshire coast. No such seat was created.⁴³ Thus the antiquity and local identity of these seats was deployed in an attempt to retain their presence in the new Scottish electoral system after 1832.

If history was one argument that was used to defend the District of Burghs seats another was related to the perceived modernity of the immediate post-war moment. Several MPs argued that this was a time of unprecedented change and that to introduce a new system before the demographic and social effects of the war were clear would be a mistake. As was noted above, local politicians in Dunfermline argued that a combination of that town and Rosyth, its massively-expanded neighbouring naval base and dockyard, would make more sense than hitching Dunfermline to two mining towns. A similar argument was made with reference to Gretna in the south west of Scotland during the discussion on the Dumfries Burghs.⁴⁴ In both these cases there had been massive expansion in the war years. Gretna was the site of a huge explosives factory which employed thousands of women during the

war years. Rosyth was a rapidly developing new town on the garden city principle as the local authority and the Admiralty sought to house the population associated with the naval base and dockyard. George Younger worried that it would be a mistake to 'wipe out' the Dumfries Burghs when a perfectly good constituency could be created in Gretna and Annan, especially after the government had spent massively to build up the factory.⁴⁵ The MP for Dunfermline, the pacifist Arthur Ponsonby (who lost the new seat in the 1918 general election), supported Younger in arguing that Rosyth was a special case and that the 1914 level of population was quite the wrong baseline to use, as the town had expanded so much since then and was likely to continue to grow.⁴⁶

In the north of Scotland, the reaction against the changes embodied in the 1917 Bill, and largely enacted in 1918, was very marked indeed. The electoral history of the Highlands was quite striking. The expansion of the electorate there had been very considerable in 1885, and the political results were almost unique in a British context in that the new electors used their new rights to reject the traditional parties and elect a series of 'Crofter' MPs at the elections of 1885 and 1886.⁴⁷ Although these were either neutered and drawn back into the Liberal fold or defeated in the elections of the 1890s, the tradition of apparent radicalism was quite strong and was reasserted from 1906. In the 1910 and 1918 elections, there were candidates in Argyll, Inverness, Ross and Cromarty, and the Western Isles under the banner of the 'Highland Land League', a reference to the politics of the 1880s. None of them made much impact but their presence is worth noting. Although the new seat of the Western Isles was created out of insular parts of Ross-shire and Inverness-shire, the Highlands lost three other seats due to the absorption of the Inverness and Wick

Districts of Burghs into their surrounding county seats, and the amalgamation of Caithness and Sutherland into a single seat: the latter was a long-standing proposal which had been headed off in 1868.⁴⁸

Radical opinion in the Highlands was confident that the new seats would still return Liberal MPs, and this did turn out to be the case in the inter-war period, although the Western Isles elected a Labour MP in 1935.⁴⁹ It was noted that seats like Inverness-shire were vast in area and the difficulties which candidates faced due to the 'absence of the means of easy communication, and to the mountainous ranges and stormy seas that divide one district from another, and make travel slow and tedious.' This was especially relevant when the proposal that the election be held within eight days of the nomination of the candidates is taken into consideration.⁵⁰ The lack of community of interest between Caithness and Sutherland was noted, they were deemed to be as different as a Welsh and an English county in 'race, language, traditions, customs, sentiments'.⁵¹ A variety of themes in Highland history were mobilised in opposition to these proposals on the assumption that in this, as in so many other areas of politics and policy, there was a case for special treatment for the region.⁵² Far from being seen as a democratising influence, the redistribution was seen as an attack on the Highlands for which the government had no mandate; this was seen as especially grievous when so many men from the Highlands were fighting 'to preserve our freedom'. Opponents of the scheme thought that the government was unduly distracted from the more important task of winning the war and that the redistribution was inappropriate and manipulative.⁵³ Newspapers across the political spectrum noted that the context of Highland depopulation ought to be considered if that was the basis on which its representation was to be reduced.

Highland towns were small because of 'misgovernment since the days of the "Forty-Five"' and

Depopulation started with the butchery of the Highlanders at Culloden by hired Germans. Then a foreign land system was thrust upon us ... In a couple of generations it culminated in the Clearances, and if it has eased off since it is only because there are fewer victims left. It is not the existing population that ought to be the basis of representation in the Highlands but the latent or potential population. Because of what the Highlands has suffered, and is suffering, we ought not to have our voice stifled; we ought to have a larger say.⁵⁴

Another newspaper argued that the Highlands were not being treated in a manner consistent with Ireland. Irish over-representation was seen as the result of an unwillingness to punish the Irish people for the mistakes of historical British policy in Ireland, and that there were grounds for dealing with the Highlands in a similar manner.⁵⁵ In a variant of the argument used in the discussions over Rosyth and Gretna, the Highland Land Settlement Association wrote to the Speaker of the House of Commons arguing that the current population levels in the Highlands would likely be altered very significantly by the process of land settlement and the demands of food production, both of which would repopulate the north of Scotland.⁵⁶ The strong levels of recruiting allegedly evident in the Highlands was also used to argue against the proposed redistribution. As campaigners against the amalgamation of Caithness and Sutherland argued: 'The government took the men away to fight for the Empire and now they want to blot us out as a separate constituency'.⁵⁷ This was also a point

made by Alpheus C. Morton, the MP for Sutherland; in a letter to the Boundary Commissioners in August 1917, he contrasted the 'loyal and remarkable' wartime service of the people of Sutherland with their 'harsh' treatment by the Boundary Commissioners.⁵⁸ It is perhaps not surprising that we should find opposition to redistribution in an area, such as the Highlands, which stood to lose seats from the process. The depth of the opposition and the range of arguments that were deployed in the interests defending the seats slated for abolition is quite striking and provides evidence that this apparently democratising moment was not always seen as such.

The other areas of Scotland that stood to lose from the redistribution, to an even greater extent than the Highlands in fact, was the Borders and the south west. In this case the Border Burghs and the Dumfries Burghs were under threat, whilst the number of county seats was to be reduced to three – Galloway, Dumfries, and a single constituency of Roxburgh and Selkirk. Berwickshire was to be part of a new seat with Haddington, and Peebles was to be merged with South Midlothian, another mining constituency. This was very unpopular across southern Scotland.⁵⁹ The principal issue that was debated in this case was the awkward marriages of counties and burghs with different industrial structures and socio-economic backgrounds. As in the Highlands, there was a feeling that the redistribution would give too much power to the industrial areas of Scotland and to Glasgow, and the inclusion of the Burghs in the county seats would mean that the constituencies in the south of Scotland would no longer be ones in which 'agriculture is the paramount interest'. It was also pointed out that the new Galloway constituency would be large, stretching 80 miles east to west from the River Nith to the Irish Sea and about 65 miles, from south to north, from the Solway Firth to the borders of Ayrshire. Even compared to

the Highlands, which were relatively well penetrated by railways, this was an area with poor communications facilities and would be very difficult for an MP to represent.⁶⁰ In response to these difficulties local political representatives tried to create a scheme for combining the two Burgh seats to produce a constituency of more than 70,000 population. This was controversial in Selkirk Town Council as some Bailies argued that there was little community of interest between the agricultural service centres in the Dumfries District and the textile industries in the Hawick District and that this proposal would not result in a rational constituency.⁶¹ The Town Councils of Hawick, Selkirk and Galashiels were hostile to this scheme and it went no further.⁶² There were wider questions raised about the possibility of an MP representing a constituency which combined agriculture and industry. One newspaper questioned the desirability

of placing upon one man the duty of attempting to represent adequately and efficiently such widely differing interests. The factory and the farm hold equally important positions in the internal economy of the district and both are entitled to send to parliament men whom they believe will best represent them respectively. ⁶³

Indeed, in the case of divided counties the Boundary Commissioners had been enjoined to separate industrial and farming areas.⁶⁴ As in the Highlands, there were criticisms of the government for introducing such a wide-ranging scheme of redistribution without an electoral mandate and at a time 'when the public mind is on the great issues of the war'.⁶⁵

A group of MPs from the south of Scotland combined to write to the Boundary Commissioners to argue against the scheme of redistribution. They referred to the long distances involved in representing constituencies of sparse population and argued that the new constituencies would make these problems much worse. They explicitly compared their area of Scotland with the Highlands, which, they argued, had been treated much more leniently. In their view this was contrary to the instructions given to the Boundary Commissioners to avoid the creation of constituencies 'inconvenient in size or character'.⁶⁶ The Boundary Commissioners prepared two memoranda in response to this letter. They noted that the MPs defined the Highlands as stretching from Shetland and Orkney in the north to Argyll in the South and encompassed six seats. These seats had an average population of 50,842 compared to the seats in the south of Scotland, stretching from Berwickshire in the east to the new seat of Galloway in the south west, with an average population of 68,666. On this basis John Barran and his colleagues appeared to have a point, although there were only four persons per 100 acres in the Highlands, compared to ten persons in the south. The Commissioners then took a slightly disingenuous line of argument. They added Perthshire and Kincardineshire, Moray and Nairn, Banff, Aberdeenshire and Kincardineshire and, particularly unconvincingly, the City of Aberdeen. This allowed them to build a comparison between the south of Scotland and the 'Highland and Northern Counties as a whole'. This brought the average populations per seat closer together: 68,666 in the south and 59,648 in the north. This was deemed to be a 'not undue disparity ... when all the relevant circumstances are taken into account' and they went on to argue that 'absolute equality of population – even if desirable – is unattainable under any scheme of parliamentary representation which has regard to existing administrative areas'. It was further

noted that the constituencies in the Highlands were much further from Westminster and the internal communications were 'incomparably more difficult' in the north. These were, of course, arguments used by Highland MPs to argue against the redistribution.⁶⁷ The difference in tone between the arguments used by representatives of the south of Scotland compared to the Highlands is quite striking. The emotional and historical arguments used by the Highlanders was of a piece with the tone of debate about the region since the 1880s. Nevertheless, when comparing the two cases, the evidence of the Boundary Commissioners' response to the former suggests that it was broadly geographical and demographic arguments and recognition of the difficulty of travelling and communicating in the large Highland seats that were crucial in securing the relatively greater representation of the Highlands compared to the south of Scotland.

This article has attempted to show that the redistribution inherent in the Representation of the People Act of 1918 had an important effect on the Scottish political landscape. The effect of these changes on the electoral map of Scotland requires some comment in conclusion. Many of the features of that landscape, which had helped to sustain Liberal domination of Scottish politics since 1832 were swept away. Alongside important social and economic changes and the extension of the electorate a new landscape was formed that provided territory across which the Labour and Scottish Unionist Parties could stride. The Liberal party declined as an electoral force but its legacy survived in a number of aspects of post-war Scotland. The progressive Unionism which was such a feature of the Scottish scene in the 1920s and 1930s owed more than a little to elements of Liberalism from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Labour Party, which broke through into

the mainstream of Scottish politics in 1922, can be seen as an outgrowth of radical Liberalism, rather than an alternative to it. Towards the end of the decade Scottish nationalism began to emerge in partisan form. Although it was not until the Second World War that it had any electoral effect, its central demand for Scottish home rule was one which would have been recognisable to Liberals who had been involved in the Young Scots Society (and who were involved in the debates reviewed in this article), or to a slightly older generation who had founded the Scottish Home Rule Association in the 1880s. Nevertheless, the novel elements of the political system of the 1920s should not be denied. New forms of politics were required in order to appeal to a truly mass electorate, organised into constituencies of a type quite different from those which date from the redistribution of the 1880s. The electoral geography of Scotland caught up, at last it might be said, with the demographic geography of the nation. The urban-industrial western region punched its weight and this made an important contribution to the changed nature of politics in the post-war period.

¹ E.A. Cameron, *Impaled Upon a Thistle: Scotland since 1880* (Edinburgh, 2010), 150–74; the period has been subject to interesting new work by Malcolm Petrie, see his ‘Public Politics and Traditions of Popular Protest: Demonstrations of the Unemployed in Dundee and Edinburgh, c.1921–1939’, *Contemporary British History*, xxvii (2013) 490–513, and “‘Contests of vital importance’: By-elections, the Labour party, and the reshaping of British radicalism, 1924-1929’, *Historical Journal*, lx (2017), 121–48.

² Robert Blackburn, ‘Laying the foundations of the modern voting system: the Representation of the People Act, 1918’, *Parliamentary History*, xxx (2011), 33–52.

³ I.G.C. Hutchison, *A Political History of Scotland, 1832–1924: Parties, Elections and Issues* (Edinburgh, 1986), 285.

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- ⁴ Michael Dyer, *Capable Citizens and Improvident Democrats: The Scottish Electoral System, 1884 – 1929* (Aberdeen, 1996), 113–17.
- ⁵ Robert Blackburn, *The Electoral System in Britain* (Houndmills, 1995), 113.
- ⁶ Hutchison, *Scottish Politics*, 30; Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 104–12, 118–21 .
- ⁷ *Scotsman*, 3 Apr. 1917, 4.
- ⁸ G. Brown, 'The Labour Party and political change in Scotland, 1918–1929: the politics of five elections', PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh (1982), 27.
- ⁹ Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 104–12.
- ¹⁰ D.J. Rossiter, R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie, *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the United Kingdom's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies* (Manchester, 1999), 51–61.
- ¹¹ *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xciv, col. 645. 11 June 1917.
- ¹² *Stornoway Gazette*, 18 Feb. 1918, 4.
- ¹³ *Stornoway Gazette*, 27 July 1917, 3.
- ¹⁴ Parliamentary Papers, XIV, Cd. 8759, *Representation of the People Bill. Redistribution of seats. Report of the Boundary Commissioners (Scotland)*, 6.
- ¹⁵ Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 11–32, 104–23.
- ¹⁶ Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh, 1983), 157.
- ¹⁷ McLean, *Red Clydeside*, 158–9.
- ¹⁸ J.J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow, 1896–1936: Socialism, Suffrage, Sectarianism* (East Linton, 2000), 93–4.
- ¹⁹ John F. McCaffrey, 'Politics issues and developments' in *Glasgow, volume 2: 1830–1912*, eds W. Hamish Fraser and Irene Maver (Manchester, 1996), 186–226.
- ²⁰ Brown, 'Labour Party', 499–500.
- ²¹ Robert Duncan, 'Motherwell for Moscow: Walton Newbold, revolutionary politics and the labour movement in a Lanarkshire constituency, 1918–22', *Scottish Labour History Journal*, xxviii (1993), 47–70.
- ²² Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow*, 208–10.
- ²³ Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 113–15; for a good discussion of the economic and employment patterns see R. Rodger, 'Employment, wages and poverty in the Scottish cities, 1841–1914', in *Perspectives of the Scottish City*, ed. G. Gordon (Aberdeen, 1985), 25–63.

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- ²⁴ Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 107.
- ²⁵ Rossiter et al., *Boundary Commissions*, 60.
- ²⁶ Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 107–8.
- ²⁷ *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xciv, col. 863, 12 June 1917.
- ²⁸ *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xciv, col. 871, 12 June 1917.
- ²⁹ *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xciv, cols 870–1, 12 June 1917; those arguing for the retention of seats in the Highlands were also critical of the retention of university representation, albeit at a reduced level, *Inverness Courier*, 20 July 1917, 2.
- ³⁰ W. Ferguson, 'The Reform Act (Scotland) of 1832: intention and effect', *Scottish Historical Review*, xlv (1966), 105–14; M. Dyer, 'Mere detail and machinery: the Great Reform Act and the effects on redistribution on Scottish Representation, 1832–68', *Scottish Historical Review*, lxii (1983), 17–34; I.M.M. MacPhail, 'The highland elections of 1884–1886', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, I (1976–8), 369–92.
- ³¹ M. Dyer, 'Burgh districts and the representation of Scotland, 1707–1983', *Parliamentary History*, xv (1996), 287–307.
- ³² *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xciv, col. 646, 11 June 1917.
- ³³ *Scotsman*, 1 Feb. 1917, 6.
- ³⁴ Stuart R. Ball, 'Asquith's decline and the General Election of 1918', *Scottish Historical Review*, lxi (1982), 44–61.
- ³⁵ Dyer, 'Burgh districts', 304.
- ³⁶ D. Powell, *British Politics, 1910–35: The Crisis of the Party System* (Abingdon, 2004), 87.
- ³⁷ *Highland News*, 3 Feb. 1917, 4.
- ³⁸ See the essays published in the *Glasgow Herald* to mark the three-hundredth anniversary of the Union of 1707 and gathered into a volume entitled *The Union of 1707: A survey of Events by Various Writers with an Introduction by Peter Hume Brown and the Text of the Articles of Union* (Glasgow, 1907).
- ³⁹ *Fifeshire Advertiser*, 4 Aug. 1917, 2.
- ⁴⁰ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 21 July 1917, 2; historical arguments were also adduced in early marshalling of the arguments to be used in defending the existence of the Inverness District, *Highland News*, 28 Apr. 1917, 5 and a petition prepared by the Town Clerk of Inverness and sent to Parliament

in the summer of 1917 noted that the District had sent a member to the UK Parliament since 1707, *Inverness Courier*, 10 July 1917, 7.

⁴¹ *Fifeshire Advertiser*, 21 July 1917, 4; 4 Aug. 1917, 2

⁴² *Dunfermline Press*, 4 Jan. 1919, 4; Hutchison, *Political History*, 282–3.

⁴³ *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 19 July 1917, 2; the Unionist agent in Wick made similar arguments about the neglect of the fishing industry in his defence of the Wick Burghs and the separate County of Caithness, see *Northern Ensign*, 31 July 1917, 4.

⁴⁴ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 21 July 1917, 2; J. Minett, 'Government sponsorship of new towns: Gretna, 1915-1917 and its implications', in *Scottish Housing in the Twentieth Century*, ed. R. Rodger (Leicester, 1989), 104–24.

⁴⁵ *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xciv, col. 877, 12 June 1917.

⁴⁶ *HC Deb.*, fifth series, xciv, col. 884–5, 12 June 1917; the Rosyth case was an interesting one in that Dunfermline had extended its burgh boundaries to include the new town, making it one of the biggest towns in Scotland by area.

⁴⁷ J.P.D. Dunbabin, 'Electoral reforms and their outcome in the United Kingdom', in *Later Victorian Britain, 1867–1900*, ed. T.R. Gourvish and A. O'Day (1988), 314–15; MacPhail, 'Highland elections', 369–92.

⁴⁸ M. Dyer, *Men of Property and Intelligence: The Scottish Electoral System prior to 1884* (Aberdeen, 1986), 106.

⁴⁹ E.A. Cameron, "'Rival foundlings': the Ross and Cromarty by-election, 1 February 1936", *Historical Research*, lxxxi (2008), 507–30.

⁵⁰ There were genuine difficulties here, not least in the case of a winter election, such as the Inverness-shire by-election of 1954.

⁵¹ *Highland News*, 3 Feb. 1917, 4; 28 July, 1917, 4; see also *Inverness Courier*, 2 Feb. 1917, 3 and *Northern Ensign*, 31 July 1917, 4, for similar arguments.

⁵² E.A. Cameron, 'The Scottish highlands as a special policy area, 1886 to 1965', *Rural History*, viii (1997), 195–215.

⁵³ *Northern Ensign*, 24 July 1917, 4.

⁵⁴ *Highland News*, 28 July 1917, 4; the same edition, however, carried (at p. 5) a letter from 'Unafraid', who argued that the 'deer forest wastes, ornamental parks and grounds "preserved" from national

use' ought not to be represented in parliament to the same extent as 'Busy hives of humanity'; the editor published this below a headline of 'Disenfranchising the deer'.

⁵⁵ *Northern Times*, 1 Mar. 1918, 2.

⁵⁶ *Northern Times*, 17 May 1918, 3; this repopulation did not occur, although there was an extensive land settlement following an act of 1919.

⁵⁷ *Northern Times*, 26 July 1917, 5; 2 Aug. 1917, 5; see also *Northern Ensign*, 7 Aug. 1917, 4.

⁵⁸ *Northern Times*, 23 Aug. 1917, 5; see also letter from 'Landholder' from Halladale, Caithness, *Northern Ensign*, 14 Aug. 1917 and from H. Henderson who simply condemned the redistribution as 'unpatriotic', *Northern Ensign*, 21 Aug. 1917, 4.

⁵⁹ *Southern Reporter*, 8 Feb. 1917, 6; *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 24 Feb. 6; Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 109–10.

⁶⁰ *Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 21 July 1917, 2.

⁶¹ *Southern Reporter*, 12 July 1917, 6; some evidence of the strength of feeling aroused can be gauged by Bailie Crichton's doubts that 'the majority of the inhabitants of Dumfries were really Scots'.

⁶² *Southern Reporter*, 26 July 1917, 6.

⁶³ *Southern Reporter*, 26 July 1917, 4.

⁶⁴ Dyer, *Capable Citizens*, 10

⁶⁵ *Southern Reporter*, 26 July 1917, 4; 30 Aug. 1917, 4.

⁶⁶ Edinburgh, National Records of Scotland (NRS), HH41/1317, Circular Letter 16 Aug. 1917. This letter was signed by John Barran, Hew Dalrymple, John W. Gulland, John D. Hope, John Jardine, Donald MacLean, Gilbert McMicking, P.A. Molteno, H.J. Tennant. This group did not put forward an alternative scheme, but John Gulland later wrote to the Speaker with two five-seat schemes for the south of Scotland, see Gulland to the Speaker, 8 September 1917; he began his letter by recognising the difficulties of redistributing in Scotland, especially the south, but argued that Scotland was being relatively badly treated compared to England and Wales and that the Scottish University seat could be traded for further territorial seats in order to settle this grievance.

⁶⁷ NRS, HH41/1317, Memoranda by the Boundary Commissioners, 31 Aug. 1917 and 10 Oct. 1917.